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The CIA Loses Its Top Brain

Is America's intelligence community, which has had smooth sailing since Ronald Reagan took office, headed for a stormy new period of controversy?

That was the fear expressed in Washington after an April 21 announcement that Adm. Bobby Ray Inman, 51, deputy chief of the Central Intelligence Agency, will leave the CIA this summer to join private industry.

Senator Joseph Biden (D-Del.) spoke for many in Congress: "Inman believed the nation can have both effective intelligence agencies and civil liberties. Without him, the intelligence agencies may be given license to try all kinds of questionable things both here and abroad."

Inman's efforts to head off proposals to permit domestic spying by the CIA and his skeptical view of risky covert ventures overseas involved him in running battles with Reagan's national-security staff. The fights took their toll, even when Inman won. Said a CIA official about his resignation: "He had just used up his patience with internecine warfare. It was starting to bother him."

Inman was rewarded with the fourth star of a full admiral when he agreed to Reagan's request to become deputy to CIA Director William Casey, who had managed the President's campaign.

Inman, then head of the code-breaking National Security Agency (NSA), made it clear he would remain only for a limited time to help revitalize an intelligence operation that had lost funds, manpower and prestige in the 1970s.

In accepting Inman's resignation, Reagan said the admiral leaves the intelligence community "in a strengthened and enhanced posture."

How smooth the CIA's future course will be depends on how well Inman's successor can reassure Congress that the agency won't become a "rogue elephant," as it was once described. Among top candidates for the job were John McMahon, who has been running the CIA's day-to-day operations, and Air Force Lt. Gen. Lincoln Faurer, who succeeded Inman at the NSA.

Many lawmakers think Inman will be a hard act to follow. Said Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.): "Nobody can match him in the intelligence service." □



Inman